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ABSTRACT

The collegial networking model, advanced for women as an alternative to the traditional "old boy" male network in the late 1970s and early 1980s, is described in this paper. Based on affiliation rather than competitiveness, the collegial model is applicable to professional women in the 1990s, with the following added recommendations: (1) recognizing the instability of one's position; (2) learning techniques for labor management; (3) promoting collaboration between younger and more experienced colleagues; (4) integrating women's social support groups into professional meetings; and (5) accepting of criticism. A conclusion is that networking remains a viable strategy for women for obtaining job-enhancing information, making professional contacts, and exchanging social support. (6 references) (LMI)

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# ALTERNATE COLLEGIAL MODEL-BASED FORMS OF NETWORKING AMONG WOMEN

## or Networking in the Nineties for the Professional Woman

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**ALTERNATE COLLEGIAL MODEL-BASED FORMS OF NETWORKING AMONG WOMEN**

**or Networking in the Nineties for the Professional Woman**

**Background: Then**

In the decades of the late 70s and early 80s, women's groups made specific efforts to develop networks among other successful and job-alike women. The value of networking seem to gain prominence with the research of Hennig and Jardim (1977) who studied women executives in the business world. In their research, they reported that successful male executives benefitted from a sociological phenomenon not then available to women executives: **the old boy network**. They defined it as "a subtle, active system of support which is dependent on friendships, persuasion, favors, promises, and connections with people who already have influence." Networks provide contacts and comradery to participants.

Carol Kleiman, a journalist for the Chicago Tribune who writes a column focusing on women at work, published a book in 1980 entitled Women's Networks, where she described 1,400 networks open to working women across the nation. Clearly, women were busy trying to provide a new structure to their business and professional relationships that could provide the information benefits and contacts associated with being successful at what they did. Some of these networks were called simply "the network," or the "new girls' networks." Some were very egalitarian; others were highly elitist. Some were arranged according to women holding similar job roles; others were developed on members being employed at very high levels (e.g. management, policy, executive levels) across diverse positions.

In 1982, a colleague and I wrote an article, "Networking for Professional Women: A Collegial Model," in which we tried to argue that the adoption of the "good old boys' network" was inadequate and was not "psychologically desirable nor professionally useful for professional women." Recognizing that the individualistic approach to professional success wouldn't help women get ahead either, we proposed an alternative, collegial model of networking which was based on mutual support rather than mutual exploitation between peers and colleagues,

capitalized on positive feminine characteristics, and which was founded in the research on the components of the helping relationship identified by Carkhuff and Berenson (1977): genuineness, empathy, respect or warmth, and concreteness. We believed that this alternative model would first, better advance the profession, second, advance women as a group, AND third, advance specific women as individuals.

Disadvantages to the typical male network. The old boy network had distinct disadvantages. Chief among them were they contributed to mediocrity by attracting similar people from a narrow and smaller pool of human talent. Because the old boy network was constructed on doing favors, loyalties, putting forth the names of folks who "were in the club and had paid their dues," those who were getting into positions of influence weren't necessarily the best and the brightest.

In the worst case scenario, individual differences were squelched and healthy dissent and creativity weren't among the rewarded characteristics. The notion of the "yes man" was a well-understood role for people aspiring to be close to those at the top. In the best case scenario, playing along to get along emphasized team work and alliance building, skills which women had not had a great deal of opportunity to develop at that time. The probability that the profession--business, education, engineering, whatever--could improve without diversity in people, creativity in thinking, or differences in working styles was greatly reduced.

Throughout the 80s, we saw women promoted to significant positions of influence. Here in Chicago, for example, we saw Hannah Gray named President of the University of Chicago, Ruth Love become the General Superintendent of the Chicago Public Schools, Jane Bryne elected Mayor of Chicago, and Ilana Rovner appointed Deputy Governor for the State of Illinois. With or without networks supporting their candidacy, some women were indeed succeeding to positions of high visibility and influence. The question remained, however: Did the ascension of these and similarly enormously talented **individual** women improve the status of women professionals in general?

In Illinois, among school 900 school superintendents, 3% this year are female, up from 2% in the past ten years. With the increase of women in high school principalships of one or two a year, we have had significant percentage increases because the numbers were so small at the base. Whether the answer to the above question is yes or no, the women in highly visible jobs certainly made the road much easier to travel for those who came later.

Beliefs about the alternative-collegial model for networking were based on the need for affiliation rather than competitiveness or individualism among and between women. Our steps to implement the networking model were really steps to develop a different style of human relationships among women colleagues that would improve the profession, women in general, and specific women as individuals.

Briefly, these ten steps were: Seek out other women colleagues. Identify women colleagues who are at the hub of various networks. Share personal expertise. Learn to give criticism. Learn to accept criticism. Recommend women for jobs, committees, and task force assignments. Tolerate differences of opinion and style (among women colleagues). Develop empathy for women who have succeeded but don't want other women to succeed. Communicate directly, honestly, and openly with professional women. Last, include men in the network.

While a decade since writing the above hasn't diminished my enthusiasm for the importance of these networking (and human relations) strategies in order to enhance the profession, women as a group, and women as individuals, **then** is certainly not **now**.

**What's different in the 90s: Now.** The whole idea in the 70s and 80s among equality-minded men and women was to expand the talent pool, widen the door of opportunity, to provide women and minorities the chance to prepare for and practice their chosen profession to the extent their individual skills and talents permitted, not their gender (or their race or ethnicity) allowed. We assumed then that the education profession, like other professions, needed powerfully different leadership, new talent at all levels, new skills, new ideas. This has not changed. What is different now that needs our attention?

Recognize that getting to the top is one thing but staying at the top is another. Just taking the Chicago examples, only Hannah Gray maintains a presence in top administrative positions (although Ilana Rovner was appointed a judge). Women administrators will be subjected to job pressures similar to those of their male counterparts. Several years ago, the top school district superintendent of the year as named by the American Association of School Administrators was fired by her board the year following her presidency. The risks to job security remain high. Getting fired is an occupational hazard in an era of turmoil, down-sizing, and considerable reform, not a personal failure. Networking to find other comparable or substantial positions becomes even more important. When this situation happens, women need to use the time available to them to search and negotiate new career options for themselves, remain ultra-professional and unembittered in their current situation, and leave that position with as good grace as possible. Asking for support from colleagues outside the immediate work arena is perfectly acceptable and psychologically desirable.

Teach women in leadership positions how to handle labor/management issues and to separate personal friendships from employee relationships. With the increase of women in educational management and the increase of women in staff positions, women administrators may have to fire or demote women and women staff may bring grievances (real or imagined) against women administrators. Staff from the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (1991) reported that while statistics regarding employee-related complaints from women employees who have women managers are not collected, complaints and charges of discrimination are expected to increase as the percent of women in administrative positions increases. Even though the EEOC only finds cause in approximately 5% of the charges filed with it, women employees will make complaints because that may be the only vehicle they see to take action against those in authority. Staff in the Illinois Department of Human Rights (1991) indicated that although uncommon at this point, women (and men) employees have also filed charges of sexual harassment against their women managers.

Without awareness that these leadership responsibilities bring necessary changes in interpersonal relationships and that behaviors that were tolerated in the past are no longer acceptable no matter what the gender is of the person in a position of authority or power, this can be devastating to the development of a sense of fairness on the side of the employees and for the support for women administrators on the other side, and the health of the organization in the middle. In situations like this, notice continues to be given to the genders of the people involved and it reinforces the unfortunate belief that women's biggest enemies are other women.

Removing the gender reference to legitimate issues of employment will take more than networking but it is an area in which veteran administrators can help new women administrators. Further, this association can meet the human sustenance needs of women in a way that protects the integrity of the employee-employer relationship.

Encourage younger colleagues to affiliate with more established professionals. In an era where younger professionals had relatively easier access to the profession, there remains a belief that one can make it on her own. This belief is a fallacy when collaboration, cooperation, and team work are essential components of success. The importance of being visible, of taking initiative, and reaching out continues to make a difference. The outreach to women professionals of color is particularly critical as our schools and classrooms reflect a rainbow of ethnic groups and races.

Build into professional meetings among women colleagues opportunities for meeting each other, socializing, and networking. Professional women are increasingly busy and their time for professional development, leisure, and socializing is particularly scarce. A summer workshop we're designing at my institution for women administrators includes opportunities for not only intellectual growth but time for health/fitness sessions and interpersonal relationships. The statement that it is lonely at the top is a cliche but nevertheless true. Opportunities for professional women to meet each other in non-judgmental environments away from the public's eye are critical for supplying emotional support and self validation.

Of all the steps to an alternative collegial model, the one that should be emphasized is the one related to criticism, or handling negative emotion in a constructive manner. Being open about issues, being honest, being supportive of colleagues and working with groups will generate more emotions than being isolated, aloof, or authoritarian. Women still can't be seen crying in public or being overly defensive and remain being perceived as successful at what they do. Thanking somebody for their criticism of one's work is hardest to do the first time but it gets easier with practice. It is personal feedback that makes us grow and improve as persons. Responding to negative comments in an emotion-neutral tone is possible when one listens carefully to what is being said and takes the time to understand the message as it relates to the job and not to the person.

**In summary**. Networking among professional women is still a viable strategy to obtain job-enhancing information, make contacts, and provide and receive human support. A collegial-based model of networking offers a psychologically desirable replacement for the more competitive and traditional form of networking generally associated with the old boy network. For these new networks to endure and benefit professional women, the need for honest, concrete, genuine communication and personal respect between and among professional women remains. As women advance professionally during the 90s, as they are expected to do, recognition of the changing employee-employer relationship will require different affiliative strategies.

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